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SUBJECT: EVACUATION EXERCISE REINFORCES AMCIT OUTREACH, EXPOSES
SHORTCOMINGS

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11. SUMMARY: The Embassy conducted a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) exercise on October 20 as part of the MAREX 2009 combined military exercise. U.S. Marines evacuated three dozen volunteers drawn from both the Embassy and the private American citizen community, using CH-53E Sea Stallion helicopters to transport them from the Embassy compound to the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard. As a result of the lessons learned in the exercise, the Embassy will expand its use of text messaging for emergency communication, will establish a proper warden system, and will update its F-77 list of potential evacuees. Post requests Washington guidance on the hardware and software available for processing evacuees, a State Department bottleneck which fell way short of the Marines' NEO Tracking System. END SUMMARY.

MAREX 2009

12. 2500 U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine personnel deployed to Timor-Leste from October 13 to 23 as part of the MAREX 2009 combined military exercise with the Defense Force of Timor-Leste (F-FDTL) and the Australian-led International Stabilization Force (ISF) (septel). The Embassy on October 20 conducted a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) exercise in order to test its emergency preparedness and to reinforce outreach to the private American citizen community. The Consular Section solicited volunteers to participate in the drill as mock evacuees. A total of 36 evacuees and 5 international observers took part in the day's events.

NEO Chronology

13. The Embassy Compound served as the rally point for evacuees. Two waves of Marines arrived at the compound via helicopter the morning of the drill, first to secure the area (assumed to be an uncertain environment due to political unrest targeted at the international community) and then establish an Evacuation Control Center (ECC). The Embassy's RSO and Consular Officer worked with the NEO Site Commander to establish three stations

inside the Embassy wall: an initial search and screening point; a processing center to compile the personal data of evacuees and to collect signed promissory notes and privacy act waivers; and an embarkation point to manifest evacuees onto particular flights. Marines escorted evacuees from their entry on the compound until their departure on an evacuation flight. Evacuees were processed again upon arrival to the ship anchored offshore. After refreshments and a brief tour, evacuees returned to the Embassy Compound and the drill ended.

Lessons Learned

¶4. The Ambassador chaired an after-action review in the days following the end of MAREX 2009. In addition, the volunteer evacuees from the private American community provided feedback on the experience from their perspective. The Embassy learned the following lessons and will make the following changes.

¶5. Means of Communication. The private American community expressed a strong preference for receiving emergency information via text message and not email. Internet access in the country is slow and intermittent, particularly in private residences, and particularly in comparison to nearly ubiquitous cell phone usage. When a late change in helicopter availability necessitated moving the drill's start time ninety minutes earlier, Post sent out simultaneous notifications to the volunteers via text and email. All the volunteers received the text and showed up for the drill on time, whereas some were unaware that an email had been sent. Had communication been

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only by email, most of our private Americans would have missed the evacuation. ACTION: Post will establish a text message listserv for all Americans in Timor-Leste and will utilize it in tandem with the existing email system to distribute warden messages and emergency information.

¶6. Means of Communication (cont.). Post was limited in its communications by not having a functioning cascade-style warden system. No private Americans have Embassy radios, for example, which forces exclusive reliance on externally-provided telecommunications services which could easily break down in an emergency. Additionally, several evacuees expressed concern about transportation arrangements and would have preferred pooling resources with someone in their geographic area. ACTION: Post will endeavor to identify individuals to serve as wardens, particularly in remote areas unlikely to receive normal communications and in areas with high concentrations of Americans.

¶7. Substance of Communication. Many Americans reported being confused by the specifics of the drill and expected to have clearer information in advance. Questions included what items to bring with them, where to report on arrival, and where to park their vehicles. The participants in the drill answered these questions in the process of the exercise, but their initial uncertainties likely mirror those of the larger American community at large. ACTION: Post will compile an evacuation frequently-asked-questions sheet and provide it to all Americans at the next Amcit Town Hall meeting.

¶8. Processing Station. The Marines utilized a hardware/software combination it called the NEO Tracking System (NTS). It consisted of multiple suitcase-sized packs with flip-up laptops

and machine-readable passport scanners. The packs were linked together wirelessly so data was instantly transferred from one station to the next and evacuees could move swiftly to the next processing station. In contrast, our consular officer labored with paper-based rosters and dramatically slowed the processing of Amcits in order to compile our reports for CA and the crisis management center. ACTION REQUEST: Post requests guidance on any available civilian system compatible with or comparable to NTS that it may deploy for its own processing of evacuees. Absent such a system, Post will either be a bottleneck in the evacuation process or it will be unable to keep Consular Affairs and other Washington offices adequately informed of the status of evacuees.

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